

THE NEED FOR EVANGELICAL UNITY.

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EVERY thoughtful observer of the fortunes of the Evangelical Party in the Church of England to-day must agree that the Party stands at the cross-roads with an opportunity for usefulness unique in its history.

Again and again during the last few years leading men who would not class themselves as Evangelicals have made confident prophecies to the effect that Evangelicals might or could, and even would, lead the Church of England in the near future. The explanation of these favourable forecasts is quite simple.

In the first place there is to be noted the very remarkable change of attitude towards Evangelicals by the Church in general. The old scornful and patronizing talk is now never heard, at any rate in public. Time was when it was the mark of the "superior mind" to gird at Evangelicals as weak-kneed Churchmen and to lecture them for intellectual feebleness and mental incompetence. Those days have gone and a new respect has taken its place. In the National Assembly no speakers have a more attentive and respectful hearing than the recognized Evangelical spokesmen, and not a committee of the Assembly is ever formed without care being taken that the Evangelical point of view is well represented. Not infrequently a vacant bishopric is filled by a man who has more or less direct sympathy with Evangelicals. Too much stress may easily be laid upon the increase of Evangelically-minded Bishops in the Southern Province, since the price which has been paid for this is seen in the constitution of the Northern Province. Ten years ago there were six or seven definitely Evangelical Bishops in the York Upper House; to-day there are probably not three who would accept that designation.

The same studied respect is shown by the non-Evangelical Church newspapers. Occasionally the cloven hoof appears in the more extreme partisan papers, but only occasionally, and never elsewhere. This, then, is one of the explanations of the favourable prophecies delivered respecting the future of Evangelicalism in the Church:

it has won a definite place for itself in the councils of the Church.

In addition to this, these favourable prophecies are inspired by the recognition of two opposite sets of facts. Some section of the Church has got to lead. The Anglo-Catholics have failed to do so, and, on the other hand, there seems to be clear evidence that the general feeling of the mass of the populace is favourable to Evangelicalism. The former remark has been repeatedly made by detached observers, and it is true. The success of the Anglo-Catholic party up till twenty years ago was extraordinary. But the intervening period has revealed the inwardness of the movement, and the easy tolerance of the English Churchfolk has reached its limits. So long as the Anglo-Catholics appeared in the public eye as "persecuted High Churchmen," who only asked to be allowed to exist, they were assured of the sympathy and even active support of a large-hearted public. But the pose is now changed. "High Churchmanship" is repudiated, the Anglo-Catholic proclaims his power. He no longer asks for tolerance but arrogantly demands submission. He denies that the Church of England has an individuality of its own; its destiny is to be merged in the Church of Rome, and that destiny the Anglo-Catholic seeks to hasten. Assuming that they really believe the things they write, the Anglo-Catholics are the only people who do not know that their policy has failed. Except in clerical circles their influence is almost negligible. They have not "got" the laity.

Test the strength of the movement in this way: I suggest that the real test whether a person has embraced sincerely the Anglo-Catholic system is not attendance at an extreme Church, but the systematic use of the Confessional. I recall following an illuminating correspondence in a Church paper in which, one after the other, contributors wrote describing how they could get people to their services but not to Confession. And, moreover, they never will. The ordinary normal English people will never accept the Confessional system again, and that involves the final rejection of the so-called "Catholic" system, for the Confessional is the pivot of the whole scheme.

Anglo-Catholicism will never lead the religious life of the country. It may gain control of the Church of England—that possibility must not be overlooked—but if this should happen it will be because the Church of England will have shrunk into a quasi-Roman Catholic

sect which will luxuriate in a back-water while the main stream of national religion sweeps on unheeding.

Nor is there any likelihood of the Broad Church party leading the religious life of the country. From its very constitution it cannot become popular, in the best sense of the word. We may recognize, and even welcome, the thought-provoking power it possesses, its stimulating force, its challenge to recklessness, the check it imposes on unthinking dogmatism. But as a movement it seems to lack the power of arousing enthusiasm in the simple mind, to be devoid of those qualities which weld a party into a solid whole and to lack a policy which will thrill and inspire its followers.

The residuary legatees are, then, the Evangelicals. Can they seize the opportunity? Do they know the day of their visitation?

We have numbers, we have a policy and an objective, we have a message to thrill and to inspire the heart and to meet human needs. There is only one essential which we lack at the moment—unity. We are not at present united, and that will prove to be a fatal defect if it cannot be remedied.

One of the most serious reflections we can make in this connection is to note how in the past, again and again, Evangelicalism has missed its opportunity by internal dissensions. The disputes between the leading Continental reformers, sometimes on political questions, but mostly on doctrinal matters, limited and weakened the whole influence of the Reformation on the Continent of Europe. Similarly here at home. The narrow-mindedness and lack of sympathy shown by the orthodox and Protestant Churchmen to the Elizabethan Puritans produced Nonconformity, and the lack of foresight and the intolerance shown in the succeeding age converted Nonconformity into Dissent. So the religious life of England and the English-speaking world was split in two. Again, in the eighteenth century, the pitiful controversy about predestination divided Evangelicals into Arminians and Calvinists, produced a terrible cleavage in their ranks and destroyed the greater influence which they would have had as an united party.

It seems just now that the same calamity is in process of taking place. Unity is essential and unity is threatened. No one in touch with our internal politics will question this, but, in any case, the subject is too delicate for proofs of this statement to be ventilated here.

The questions upon which we differ among ourselves are very well known : the nature and character of the Authority of Scripture, what exactly is meant by " the inspiration of the Bible," and the doctrine of the Atonement.

I do not propose to attempt the discussion of even one of these very large questions, but one or two superficial observations may be made.

" Criticism " of the Bible is a fact which has got to be reckoned with. It is an elaborate and complicated matter of study, and the way in which minds of different types will react to it must inevitably vary. But, at the same time, it ought not to be difficult in a general way to draw a clear line between what is admissible and what is inadmissible. Believing criticism is one thing and unbelieving criticism a very different thing. In other words, the popular classification, critics and non-critics, is fatally wrong. " No one," wrote Professor Orr, " who studies the Old Testament in the light of modern knowledge can help being to some extent a Higher Critic." Our religion is an historical religion ; its foundations are rooted in history. Consequently, those historical facts must be open to examination. We cannot have it both ways : claim historicity and rule out historical examination. Probably no one desires to do so. The real issue does not lie between those who uncritically accept and those who criticize the content of Scripture, but between those who accept and those who deny that the Bible contains a supernatural revelation. Was the Jewish religion the result of the Holy Spirit taking under His tutelage, in an absolutely unique and unparalleled way, a " chosen people," developing and training them until they were equipped to receive the final revelation in the Person of Jesus Christ ? Or was it the outcome of a religious people evolving a lofty monotheism solely by the activity of their own unaided spiritual genius : was it the outcome of a merely natural process, like civilization, operating in another sphere of human experience ? The former is " believing criticism " and the latter " unbelieving." The former is probably helpful and illuminating : the latter is of only speculative interest and leads nowhere.

It is along some such line as this that a reconciliation might be made among ourselves. Personally, I have never met an Evangelical who would deny the Supernatural Character of the Biblical Revelation.

The doctrine of the Atonement is again a matter upon which there is much division among us. It is a commonplace that this doctrine has developed along three main lines: (1) the substitutionary view, (2) the moral influence view, and (3) the representative view. The centre of gravity of Christianity for Evangelicals has always been and must be the Cross, and here the Evangelicals of the eighteenth century were true to type. But because they preached the Atonement only in terms of the substitutionary view it should not be argued that a man is not a faithful Evangelical who stresses the other two views.

I believe here, again, an immense amount of misunderstanding exists among us. Every doctrine which lives, lives simply because of the truth it expresses. Now, the substitutionary view of the Atonement has lived because it embodies an eternal truth. The truth may require re-expression: it may have been crudely stated. But the very fact that this theory lives on—call it the substitutionary view, or the penal view, or the transactional view, or what you will—proves that it embodies truth. What is needed is a frank and open discussion of such a subject as this among Evangelicals, and it would almost certainly be found that the differences were of small importance. We do not altogether understand one another's mind.

What we need is a Conference that will face these matters and others like them. Not a Conference which seeks to frame an eirenicon in vague language and ambiguous terminology which anyone can accept, but a Conference which will boldly talk out these questions with a view to arriving at an understanding.

It is very largely suspicion which keeps us apart from one another, and that suspicion can only be dispersed by free and open discussion.

For this reason the Cheltenham Conference is taking the need for Evangelical Unity as its subject when next it meets in June next. In years gone by we have dealt with difficult subjects quite fearlessly. But no subject so difficult and delicate as this has ever been before us.

If we are used by God to heal the breach and unite our ranks in one fellowship we shall have done much for the whole religious life of the Church and the nation.